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The Public University and the Private Student: A False Dichotomy

Abstract: This paper contributes to the discussion created by The Campaign for the Public University over the recent changes to the higher educational system in England on the basis of the Browne Report. The paper offers a critical engagement with some of the contradictions and elisions contained within the Browne Report.

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Keywords: Browne Report. Cultural Theory. Educational Theory.

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The higher education crisis in England has been dominated by the headline issue of fees. That the media, students and indeed politicians should focus their energies on this issue is inevitable. The UK Campaign for the Public University and the Humanities and Social Sciences Matter Campaign are indicators, however, that the very idea of what a university is has been threatened by the passing of the recent legislation on student funding.[1] The overall critique of the new provisions and structures for tertiary education in England is that it has replaced a public university system still connected, despite all the historical changes down to the Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) Reports, to the Enlightenment idea of the public university with a "free market" model in which students are customers and university institutions are service providers which succeed or fail on the basis of a competition over product quality. Martin McQuillan spells out the possible dangers of such a system in stark terms when he writes:

[1] See http://publicuniversity.org.uk/

> If there is no public funding and no funding council to distribute it then there will be no cap on student numbers for institutions. Humanities departments in "elite universities" will only survive by piling students high and servicing them at low costs. The Browne Report does not set them free to compete with the world's best universities, it impoverishes them and turns all of the arts, humanities and social sciences in England into teaching-focussed universities.[2]

The position of the Humanities, enshrined in the Philosophy Faculty, was the issue upon which the Enlightenment model of the public university was constructed[3], and it once again it is the pivotal issue in the new debate, given what has happened on London and other city streets in the last few months one could call it a conflict, over the nature of the institutional system we call the university. As Stefan Collini stated in the *London Review of Books*, one month after its publication in October 2010, the Browne Report "signals a redefinition of higher education and the retreat of the state from financial responsibility for it."[4] There are, undoubtedly, laudable aims in the report headed by Lord Browne of Madingely, former Chief Executive of BP. The attempts to widen access to university education and to bridge the funding gap created by the Thatcher years are undeniably important, even if many do not believe Browne's new structures will deliver on them.[5] However, it is on the basis of this "Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance" that the coalition government has based its university reforms and so, in the on-going critique of those "reforms," it is important that we continue to demonstrate the contradictions, the blindnesses

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[2] Martin McQuillan, "If you tolerate this … Lord Browne and the Privatisation of the Humanities", http://www.thelondongraduateschool.co.uk/thoughtpiece/if-you-tolerate-this...-lord-browne and the privitisation of the humanities/

[3] See Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties/ Der Streit der Fakultäten*, trans. and eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp.233-327.

[4] Stefan Collini, "Browne's Gamble" in *London Review of Books*, 32.21, 4 November 2010, pp.23-25.

[5] On the issue of widening access see the response of The Sutton Trust in its "Initial Response to the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance". http://www.suttontrust.com/

and the rhetorical sleights of language which characterise what a majority within the academic sphere consider to be a deeply flawed document.

The Browne Report begins with two opening paragraphs which reference the Enlightenment model of the university as a public space for research and the free pursuit of knowledge. "Higher education matters," it begins, before going on:

> It helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society. Higher education institutions (HEIs) generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society. They bridge the past and future; the local and the global.[6]

This vision of the university as a place which preserves and generates culture and national identity does not endure, however, and by the third paragraph the report is discussing the university system in almost exclusively economic (in the sense of financial) terms. One repeated phrase about whether particular universities remain "a going concern," gives something of the quality of the economic perspective in which the report was written (46, 50). If universities are not "going concerns" then they may be closed down or merged with other more commercially viable institutions. Whether such an institution was a "going concern" intellectually is neither, apparently, here nor there.

Much attention has already been paid to the report's unproven belief in the power of student choice to raise standards within the university sector. The report states early on:

> We want to put students at the heart of the system. Students are best placed to make the judgment about what they want to get from participating in higher education. We have looked carefully at the scope to distribute funding by some objective metric of

[6] *Securing a Sustainable Future For Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance* http://www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report, p.14.

> quality: but there is no robust way to do this and we doubt whether the choices of a central funding body should be put before those of students (25).

The Browne report does not seem to feel the need to prove this point. It would seem to be self-evident that students know better than professional bodies of educationalists what is best for them, and it seems they know that before they even begin their higher education. That a relatively "free market" approach to tertiary education will make student choice a formative force reshaping the education that students then consumer appears unproblematic to the writers of the report. One wonderful example of double-speak gives a flavour of how this issue is presented at the same time as being repressed: "The relationship between the student and the institution will be at the heart of the system; and institutions will have more autonomy than today to respond to what students want" (27). That this total trust in the rationality and quality-forming power of student choice has already been qualified in relation to Science, Medicine and Engineering subjects, is obviously a glaring hole in the report's ideological thrust (see 25). Students are to have free choice, but only sometimes; university are to be more autonomous, apart from those areas in which they need greater regulation. That the Browne Report presents such contradictions as pragmatic imperatives is not surprising; but that does not stop them from being contradictions ideologically and in terms of systematic coherence.

I want to focus on one rather astonishingly rhetorical moment, before then using this to move on to the implications of one piece of "constructive" "innovation." The notable moment comes early enough in the report in Chapter 2 "Evaluation of the Current System". In this chapter the report establishes the groundwork for its funding proposals by declaring that most people consulted believed "that those who benefit directly from higher education as graduates ought to make a contribution to the costs" (20). This seems reasonably logical, given that almost all systems across the OECD community of nations, like the U.K. system, now

include a percentage of student loan contribution to the costs of third-level education. [The OECD = Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. The report goes on, however:

> The primary reason for this is that graduates benefit directly from higher education. The public also receives a benefit but this is less than the private benefit.
>
> Recent OECD research shows that in the UK the benefits of higher education to the individual are, on average, over 50% higher than the public benefits. The private returns to higher education in the UK are high by international standards, though the private benefits exceed the public benefits in most other OECD countries as well. As a consequence it is not surprising that the argument for a private contribution to higher education has been made - and won - elsewhere as well as in England, in countries with a wide range of political values such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Japan and Korea. (21)

The statement of comparison and calculation would make anyone concerned with education and the university system pause and perhaps take a deep breath. It is not the disingenuous mixing of "arguments" (concerning a partial contribution to costs as opposed to, as singularly recommended by this report, a total contribution) that takes the breath away here, but simply the statement that the private and the public can be so definitely separated and then weighed and measured. The entire ideology of the report, which argues for the end of the state's support for most university subjects and for the Humanities and Social Sciences *tout court*, is clearly evident here in its separation, on purely economic terms, of the public and the private. Both of those spheres are now viewed economically, separated through a calculation of numerical returns (private income versus public taxes on that income). The humanistic and cultural critique of such a purely economical mode of thought should be clear. It needs to be

made, and loudly. But we risk missing another error in this mode of economical thinking if we move on to that critique too quickly, and here I want to remain with the economic argument for a while.

The fact of the matter is the economics of this statement about private and public returns does not work *in its own terms*, does not work *economically*; and more than that, the OECD report referenced as evidence in this statement manifestly demonstrates the paucity of the thinking being presented here. The OECD report in question, *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators*, 2010, when we read through its almost five hundred pages of minute data and commentary, gives the lie to the argument, or rather here call it a rhetorical move, being presented in the Browne Report. It is true that the report in "Indicator A8" entitled "What Are the Incentives to Invest in Education?" the OECD does show statistics indicating that on average a man with a tertiary education will receive USD 300,000 extra salary in his career and a woman USD 200,000. Against this they show that the "net public return to an investment in tertiary education is USD 86,000 for males, when accounting for the main costs and benefits of this level of education." They go on: "This is almost three times the amount of public investment in tertiary education, and as such, provides a strong incentive for governments to expand higher education." (135) Notice how the numbers are not compared in a book-keeping plus and minus style. Notice that the USD 86, 000 gain to the economy is viewed as an excellent investment for all OECD countries. Think of the multiplier on that return! *Education at a Glance*, 2010, does go on to state that because of the "high private returns" tertiary education provides to the individual "that education may need to be expanded by increasing access and by making loans more readily available to individuals, rather than by lowering the costs of education" (136). Time and again, however, the OECD *Education at a Glance* report makes it clear that the consensus seems to be for a partial

contribution to the costs of each student's education. It balances that agreement on private contribution with the following:

> Economic benefits of education flow not only to the individual but also to society through lower social transfers and through the additional taxes individuals pay once they enter the labour market .... In shaping policies, it is important to consider the balance between private and public returns. (136)

The simple plus and minus calculations the Browne Report creates out of these figures is not produced in the spirit of balancing the private and the public, however. We know that they are presented in order to make the case for an epochal, unprecedented abnegation of state responsibility for the funding of tertiary level education in England. What is surprising beyond such a free market "no such thing as society" ideology, is that the economic argument is itself spurious. Increased earnings versus average net returns is not a meaningful calculation and is a totally misleading figure upon which to base the statement that the public benefit from university education is less than the private. We do not at present tax people at 70% or 80%, although as an Irish university worker I can say that some OECD countries seem to be moving in that direction. But to go from average numbers on earnings and on net tax returns to such statements about overall "benefits" is so grossly reductive as to appear constructively misleading. The fact that men and women educated in universities earn more, stay in work longer, and are better suited to the challenges of an evolving work environment must mean a greater commercial benefit to society than is simply calculated on the available figures for the "net public return." How much money is pumped back into the economy through these increased wages would surely need to be part of any overall picture of "benefit," if such a picture were available. However, as the report states: "raising levels of education will give rise to a complex set of fiscal effects beyond those currently taken into account. As earnings generally increase with educational attainment, those with higher levels

of education consume more goods and services, and thus pay additional taxes on their consumption. In current calculations the public returns are underestimated." (136-7)

Elsewhere *Education at a Glance* looks at other partially or wholly incalculable benefits of university education, all of which are meaningful on a private and a public benefit. For example, if, as the statistics clearly show, university educated people generally do not make up part of the long-term unemployment statistics, is that a private or a public benefit? Elsewhere we find the principle of incalculability squarely and unflinchingly addressed by the OECD: "Education may affect peoples' lives in ways that go beyond what can be measured by economic outcomes such as labour market earnings .... These potential effects include a variety of social outcomes such as health, civic participation, political interest and happiness, as well as crime." (154) The more one reads the OECD *Education at a Glance*, 2010, report alongside the Browne Report, the more the impoverished thinking of the latter shines through. The OECD presents its figures in a scrupulous fashion and is painstakingly careful not to make sweeping statements about them. Anyone who begins to read such a report as *Education at a Glance*, 2010, will see how rigorous the OECD is with its data, and also what a complicated balance between public and private contributions and benefits it promotes in and through its figures and commentaries on those figures. There is one thing that the OECD makes crystal clear in its report, however, repeating the principle again and again: "The level of public expenditure shows the value government places on education." (230) I could have cited this principle from a number of places in the report, but I quote it from this section since it is here in "Indicator B3" that the argument is made once again that "high private returns" on a third-level education merit a partial contribution from students

benefiting from that education.[7] The report opens the next section, "Indicator B4. What Is The Total Public Spending On Education?" with the following:

> Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure indicates the priority placed on education relative to other public areas of investment, such as health care, social security, defence and security. (238)

The argument that no public expenditure should go towards the vast majority of the third-level educational system in England seems a peculiarly poor reading of *Education at a Glance*, 2010. It is such a poor reading, in fact, that, if it were presented to me by a university student attending one of my classes I might request the student, paying closer attention this time to the details of his or her primary sources, rewrite his or her essay from scratch. If the only criteria affecting the quality of my teaching were how many students I was able to attract into my courses, and if I viewed those students not as complex human beings but as atomistic units of capital, I might be tempted to give the hypothetical student a 1st Class mark and turn a blind eye to the inaccuracies of his or her reading.

There is a great question hanging over the Browne Report's vision of teaching. This is my second concern. It is a concern which relates to the issue of autonomy we have already glimpsed in that statement: "The relationship between the student and the institution will be at the heart of the system; and institutions will have more autonomy than today to respond to what students want" (27). Have universities been demanding more autonomy? If the autonomy in question comes in the form of a 100% reduction in state investment for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the replacement of the balance between state and university with a free market system based on severe unregulated competition for student numbers, is it an autonomy one would ever desire? We can and perhaps should ask, also, why

[7] *Education at a Glance*, pp.222-237.

a country or national government itself would consider an autonomous university a benefit rather than a net loss. The university is an institution, after all, designed to produce an enlightened citizenry capable of progressing and developing the freedoms and wealth the enlightened state desires. There are very good reasons, as the OECD repeatedly state, for national governments to make sizeable contributions to the tertiary education of its population. Because of that the idea of autonomy, of a severing of the relationship between state and university system, seems counter-logical, ill advised on a social, a cultural and an economic level.

Autonomy is a rhetorical term for abandonment in the Browne Report, save where it contradictorily calls for renewed regulation. We have seen the call for regulation over Science, Medicine and Engineering, but that is perhaps unsurprising to anyone working in the Humanities and Social Sciences in England. What is perhaps even more contradictory is the call for regulation over teaching. Having placed a free market system of student choice at the core of its vision of the new university – "Institutions will face no restrictions from the Government on how many students they can admit. This will allow relevant institutions to grow; and others will need to raise their game to respond" (28) – it then worries about its own belief that competition will raise the quality of the courses offered to these free floating, market-driven students. This anxiety over its own free market ideology leads the report to the introduction of compulsory teaching training for all new academics:

> It will be a condition of receipt of income from the Student Finance Plan for the costs of learning that institutions require all new academics with teaching responsibilities to undertake a teaching training qualification accredited by the HE Academy, and that the option to gain such a qualification is made available to all staff – including researchers and postgraduate students – with teaching responsibilities. (45)

That compulsory teacher training is not consistent with a rhetoric of autonomy is so obvious it needs little comment. However, the move demonstrates how far away from deregulation the Browne Report really is. Setting unfettered market forces loose upon the Humanities and Social Sciences is one thing, but actually giving universities greater powers of judgement and action is a very different one, and the Browne Report has no interest in that. That university teachers need no teaching qualification, save a BA and a PhD, a proven research record in their field and significant teaching experience before having a hope of permanent employment, has for some time been considered a glaring hole in the contemporary bureaucratic environment of regulation and audit. Browne seizes the opportunity to plug that gap in public regulation. We cannot, after all, in our culture of Quality and Transparency, leave academics alone within universities to train themselves. Who are they to know what teaching is?

The last rhetorical question is, despite or perhaps because of its irony, a deeply serious one, and it brings out another worrying thing about the Browne Report and the university system that is now being restructured around it. University teaching, if it is to remain worthy of the name, has some rather special features. In the first place it is not simply service teaching. It is at all levels, from First Year to Graduate teaching, something that is profoundly connected to research. Because of this, and because the university is, in its modern, Enlightenment sense, a philosophical institution, teaching is also subject to question in all levels of the university. What I mean by that is that university teachers, if they are worthy of the name, do not simply teach, they also question and explore the nature of teaching as they teach. They explore, for example, whether things are easily teachable or not; whether certain forms of knowledge are misfigured by certain forms of teaching or not; whether certain kinds of questions dictate certain kinds of answers; whether power structures are necessary or debilitating in the search for knowledge and understanding within a teaching situation; whether women and men learn

differently; whether there are multiple intelligences or universally innate cognitive faculties. They even go as far, as I have sometimes done, to question whether teaching is in fact, in its more traditional senses, possible at all. Above all, university teachers, if they are worthy of the name, bring attention in numerous ways to the less than neutral, less than transparent nature of teaching and learning. As Stefan Collini reminds us, the more profound, life-changing results of teaching can happen a long while after it has been delivered. Student choice is a very blunt and one-dimensional tool with which to restructure something as philosophically profound as the actual teaching and student experiences of actual teachers and students in actual universities.

The Browne Report reduces university teaching to a consumer product which universities, if they are "going concerns," sell in huge numbers. If universities fail to sell their teaching products in large enough numbers then they are, like so many of the high street shops closing down in the ferocity of the current economic downturn, sold off or boarded up. The Browne Report reduces both students and teachers to *private* individuals existing within institutions which are *public* only because of their contribution to and potential drain on the national economy. There is a deracinated vision of what a university is at the heart of the Browne Report, something which now threatens to turn the nation's universities into nothing more than commercial enterprises. Despite the political loses of the end of last year, we must as students and teachers of the university insist that Lord Browne, or perhaps someone with a little more knowledge of the university system, and thus a little more qualified to assess it, takes it back and starts it all over again.

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